DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 558 FL 018 678

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TITLE Writing: The Development of Coherent Rhetorical Forms in Advanced Learners of a Second Language.
PUB DATE 30 Jun 90
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Communication Association of Japan (20th, Tokyo, Japan, June 30, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advanced Students; Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Language Patterns; Program Descriptions; *Rhetoric; Second Language Instruction; Student Evaluation; Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Japan; *University of Pittsburgh PA

ABSTRACT

Research suggests that culturally distinctive first-language rhetorical patterns influence second language composing skills. Frequently, however, these patterns have never been taught formally and are not refined, leaving first-language composing largely underdeveloped. Teaching second language learners to compose often requires attending to the students' cognitive development as well as their linguistic training. Writing instruction must extend well beyond the realm of rote grammar practice or the mechanical manipulation of prescribed rhetorical models to include ways of generating thoughts, analysis of these ideas into coherent sets, and experience using diverse modes to communicate this thinking with others. The method for teaching writing to Japanese students learning advanced English as a Second Language at the University of Pittsburgh's program in Japan reflects this approach. The students, united by a common interest in studying business administration in the United States, study business-specific topics, discuss them in class, and write two-page essays based on their readings, summarizing the article read and reacting to it. This type of assignment provides practice in organization and in separation of fact from opinion, and accommodates varying levels of language proficiency and writing styles. Students are guided to use appropriate strategies and formats, and receive written and oral feedback. (MSE)

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WRITING: THE DEVELOPMENT OF COHERENT RHETORICAL FORMS IN ADVANCED LEARNERS OF A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Paper presented during the 20th Anniversary Convention of
The Communication Association of Japan
30 June 1990
Meiji University (Izumi Campus), Tokyo, Japan

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WRITING: THE DEVELOPMENT OF COHERENT RHETORICAL FORMS IN ADVANCED LEARNERS OF A SECOND LANGUAGE

by David Wardell

Abstract: Research has suggested that culturally distinctive first language rhetorical patterns influence second language composing skills. However, quite frequently these first language rhetorical patterns have never been formally taught or refined so that first language composing skills remain largely underdeveloped. Therefore, teaching second language learners to compose often requires attending to the students' cognitive development as well as to their linguistic training. For this reason, writing instruction must extend well beyond the realm of rote grammar practice or the mechanical manipulation of prescribed rhetorical models to include: ways of generating thoughts; analysis of these ideas into coherent sets; and experience using diverse modes to communicate this thinking with others. Quite simply, learning to compose requires "doing" and not "descriptions of doing."

This paper explores a way in which writing was taught to advanced-level Japanese students learning English at the University of Pittsburgh ELI (Japan Program) during a year-long project. Specifically, this paper describes the overall design of the writing program, the types of assignments, the methods of instruction, the means of evaluation, and the roles students played during this process of linguistic development.

Relevance is a key to most learning, and this is particularly true in learning to compose--whether in the first or in the second language. Pedagogy which overlooks the powerful influence of practicality during this language development process usually leads to unsatisfactory educational outcomes, and much of the failure in learning to write can be attributed to deficiencies in meeting learner needs. Jacobs and Chaiariyakul (1987) correctly point out:

> In ESL composition there has been too much focus on the ESL part and too little on the composition area. Communication is neglected as correctness gets all the attention. But communication is what gives life to writing. Without an audience to write for, without a meaningful topic to write about, composition class is dull.

I would take this point a step further and say that the type of composition class Jacobs and Chaiariyakul have identified is not only dull but is probably also a complete waste of time. Failure to make composition lessons relevant greatly reduces learner retention and impedes assimilation of the skills being addressed.

Writing is not so much dull as it is made to be dull. There is considerable evidence that children are quickly attracted to the writing process after seeing adults perform this activity and that children engage in "writing" as an enjoyable pastime long before being trained to write in school. Experiments dating from

the early part of this century by Vygotsky and Luria have relevance to this topic. Certainly research in this area merits a much fuller account than I can devote time to here, but a growing body of evidence suggests that children begin producing iconographic representations of their thoughts well before instruction in formal writing conventions is experienced. In other words, writing--albeit unconventional--seems to emerge as a natural extension of normal first language acquisition. Significantly, it is not until the constraints of formal written conventions are experienced that negative attitudes about writing begin to develop. Here schools, teachers, and traditional pedagogy stand heavily condemned.

My finding in this area is that composition classes need not be dull or a waste of time. However, to achieve success, the design of the course must be built on materials immediately meaningful to the needs of the students within the class. LaBrant (1953) offers agreement saying that "persistent practice" in writing on a subject of interest is a far more effective way to teach than providing drill in grammar or in supplying exercises for correction.

I am going to be bold and suggest that as a rule the ready-made writing assignments in commercial textbooks will be unsuccessful in addressing the particular interests of most student populations. Just about any general textbook is going to be very wrong for some group--not at all because the level is incorrect or the syllabus fails to follow sound linguistic principles--but because the topics are irrelevant.

Let's take, for example, Study Writing: A Course in Written English for Academic and Professional Purposes by Liz Hamp-Lyons and Ben Heasley (Cambridge: 1987). In one unit students are asked to imagine they are Britain's Minister for Youth Employment and then are instructed to make a report to the Prime Minister explaining why change to the system of National Insurance for the 16-19 age group is necessary. Even though some accompanying data is supplied to assist students in preparing this report, don't you agree that the topic strays far from what is relevant to most second language learners?

Needless to say, instructor creativity is requisite for classes that are stimulating and meaningful. In other words, teachers who are responsible for developing second language composition skills must not be constrained by prescriptive textbook materials. These instructors must develop a sensitivity to the specific needs of the group being trained and take the initiative in designing assignments that meet those needs.

I would like to describe the student population in my classes at the University of Pittsburgh English Language Institute in Tokyo and the types of writing assignments we are using. I issue a caveat, however, that what has worked very well at our school may need considerable adjustment to fit the needs of another group. Again, this underscores the thought that relevance cannot be generalized to all learning situations and to all student populations.

Students enroll in my course because of their interest in studying for an MBA in the United States. While this rather sharply defined common goal serves to establish strong criteria for evaluating whether or not learning materials will hold the attention of the class, it also acts as a brake against adopting almost any commercially-prepared text on writing instruction.

I have, therefore, developed lessons around topics such as "Business and the Environment," "Women in the World of Business," and "Marketing Trends in the United States and Japan," using materials from current magazines and newspapers to support these themes. Weekly, one or two readings on a specific business topics are assigned. Then, during a one-hour student-led seminar, the major ideas within the week's assignment are discussed to establish a common understanding among the students about the content of these materials. This general discussion not only cultivates oral skills necessary in academic debate, it also serves as a forum for exploring successful strategies of argumentation. Perhaps more significantly, this discussion also acts as an effective pre-writing activity. Following this group activity, the students individually prepare a two-page paper outside of class based on themes appearing in the reading assignment.

This brings us to the question: What kinds of first language composition skills do students bring to the second language classroom? It has been my experience in five different

cultures that first language composing skills remain largely underdeveloped. Very rarely has a student appeared in one of my classes who has a previously acquired internal understanding of how to compose in any language.

Discussions by Kaplan (1972 and 1987) and Jenkins and Hinds (1987) point to the existence of culturally distinctive rhetorical patterns in written discourse. While language instructors may assume that these patterns have been cultivated through formalized instruction, this may not be the case at all. In fact, similar patterns of culturally distinctive reasoning may well prevail within spoken discourse; yet, because of the ephemeral nature of speech, it is more difficult to identify and catalog these distinctions. In contrast, because writing produces a permanent artifact which permits a more thoughtful analysis of how argumentation has been developed, we can more readily formulate a hypothesis about the existence of culturally distinctive rhetorical patterns.

However, acknowledging that such reasoning patterns exist may offer little proof that these traits have been formally cultivated. Indeed, I would argue that culturally distinctive rhetorical patterns most probably evolve during the general acquisition process and are not the result of classroom instruction. If my own experiences serve as any measure of the world at large, there is strong reason to suspect that few students in any culture have ever received meaningful instruction in how to compose. Haynes (1978) tends to agree with this assessment, saying:

"...it is probably safe to say that most students throughout the elementary and secondary years have been given very little instruction in the matter of how to write (p. 82)."

The implications here for writing instructors is enormous. We must begin more or less from scratch. This does not mean we must begin by teaching basic grammatical patterns; however, it does mean that we must teach basic composition procedures. The two are distinctly different. Learning to compose requires "doing" and not "descriptions of doing."

Sokmen (1988) states that having students writing nearly all the time and encouraged by short conferences contributes to learning to write. Therefore, "writing, rather than talking about writing, should be central to a writing course."

There are several findings I can report in this area. One is that regular writing assignments of moderate length seem to be more effective in promoting composition skills than a host of one-sentence or one-paragraph activities or a single very long writing project. As I mentioned before, each week my students produce a two-page composition based upon an issue concerning the business world. This composition consists of two parts: (1) an objective summary of the article for that week and (2) a well-supported reaction to the text.

A variety of intellectual problems must be solved within this framework. First of all, organizational control becomes

quite important--yet manageable. Because of its length, a two-page paper requires multiple paragraphs for effective organization. It has been my experience that when writers begin to sort ideas into separate paragraphs, categories of thought begin to emerge, relationships become more sharply defined, and overall organization improves. Single-paragraphs do not allow this to happen at all while the complexity of ideas within long term papers usually makes organizational control difficult for untrained writers.

Another challenge within this assignment is the requirement that facts must be separated from opinion. The summary section of the paper must remain objective reporting; value-laden vocabulary and other evidence of prejudice must never intrude. At the same time, the opinion section of the paper must contain only one opinion which is validated by concrete evidence. References to the text as well as citations of outside authorities need to be included. Learning to separate facts and evidence from opinions and judgments is an intellectual skill needed at the university level and one that can be practiced to good effect in ESL/EFL classrooms.

Another finding related to teaching second language learners to compose concerns different levels of proficiency. For the development of this linguistic skill, I believe it is not important--in fact, it may even be counter-productive--to separate students into neatly arranged groups according to ability. I am not suggesting that rank beginners should join

advanced students, but there are some very positive things that can be achieved when the range of learners in a writing classroom are not all at the same level.

To begin with, the compositions prepared by the better students can serve as models for the weaker ones to emulate. At the same time, Harrell (1986), describing a large writing class with learners at various levels of proficiency, mentions how he encouraged the good writers to tutor the poor ones--that type of tutoring proved successful and lifted some of the pressure from the teacher's shoulders.

Another difficulty affecting many composition classes is a pedagogical design requiring all students to perform at ordained levels of proficiency. This is an error for it overlooks the fact that learning to write takes time and that this learning occurs according to sets of behavior unique to each person.

We do not prescribe uniformity to most human behaviors--the position we assume in sleep, the moment to drink our seven required glasses of liquid each day, or the length of time to brush our teeth; therefore, it is equally important to allow flexibility for individual differences in the realm of composing. A growing number of researchers, including Emig (1971 and 1983), Berens (1986), and Chan (1986), have noted that the way composition is taught often takes no account of the processes by which individuals produce their written work.

The implications here are obvious when we consider the constraints usually in force in language classrooms. Teachers too often require students to compose within rigid time periods and ignore a broad range of personalized procedures which may, in fact, be necessary for writing success. One of my colleagues regularly states in our teachers' room that students who are absent from writing class will automatically receive a low grade because "the writing has to be done during the class period." I privately consider this both pigheaded and wrong but am deterred by the politics of our profession from lodging a protest. Why must the writing be done during the class period? Why must the instructor set constraints that in no way reflect the conditions under which composition normally occurs beyond the schoolhouse gate?

I have tried to accommodate individual composition styles within my MBA classes. Following the seminar discussion described above, students have a weekend to prepare their 2-page essays, giving them ample time to exploit their personal composing behaviors.

On occasion, we have held some introspective discussions about the best time to compose, what type of equipment to use, and so forth. Some students have reported going home immediately after the discussion to prepare a rough draft of their essay which is later revised. Others prefer to think about the topic until Sunday evening when they do most of their writing. I know for a fact that a few are prone to waiting until the eleventh

hour to get started. Nevertheless, having the weekend "to breathe" not only contributes to the composing process, it also more nearly replicates the way in which writing occurs in the real world--the world in which teacher control is absent and the personal resources of the student must takeover.

Teacher feedback on writing is appropriate and an essential feature of writing instruction. Learning to compose is a developmental process in which a teacher's direction can play a considerable role in improving student performance. Even though research has shown that teachers' critiques often have limited effect in refining students' composing skills, this is mainly attributed to instructors' preoccupation with the correction of discrete points and their failure to address more global concerns related to rhetorical designs.

Spack and Sadow (1983) have produced convincing evidence that discrete point evaluation leads to negative results. By using a traditional composition teaching method which focuses on the form and correctness of a finished product, teachers ask students to produce writing which does not reflect the actual writing process. Student writing is often characterized by stiff prose, repetition of mistakes, inadequate development of ideas, lack of involvement in topics and lack of confidence in the ability to write well.

The implication here is that not only are effective means of communicating feedback about composition needed (and possible)

but also the aims of that feedback must be more clearly defined than may normally be the case. Attention must shift from discrete point correction to more global rhetorical matters.

For example, Reid (1987) argues that university professor frustration over non-native speaker papers is not really caused by poor grammar (after all, these students have had to pass rigorous grammar-based examinations prior to admissions) but rather the frustration comes from the non-native speaker's limited or skewed perception of what is expected.

> "For teachers preparing NNS for academic work, the solution to this problem is both complex and simple. The most difficult part is persuading the students that (a) the academic audience expects specific strategies and formats, and (b) the teachers are not trying to change the ways they [students] think (culturally knotty), only the ways they present their thoughts (Reid, 1987:34)."

Guiding students to use appropriate strategies and formats should become an essential part of the feedback process. To do this--to cultivate anticipated rhetorical formats--it is essential for teachers to be familiar with the types of real writing tasks their students will be expected to perform within university coursework. Both Reid (1987) and Horowitz (1986) suggest that this is an area which has yet to be well articulated.

Related to this issue, Kayfetz (1980) notes that ESL students in university composition courses will do much of their

future writing for non-academic purposes such as business, personal correspondence, and for classes other than English. Persons reading this writing will primarily be interested in the content of what they are reading. Content is revealed to them on the strength of the writing's clarity and organization. Clarity and organization do not appear to be enhanced by discrete point corrections of the text.

Writing feedback within my course is both written and verbal. After receiving the week's assignments I prepare a written evaluation for each essay I have received. This evaluation examines the two parts of the assignment (summary and opinion) separately, and attempts to point out the strengths and weaknesses of each section.

For two reasons I never make marks on my students' essays. First, I think it shows disrespect to write on another person's paper; it is a psychological blunder to scribble comments--no matter how well intended--on a student's essay. More importantly, I think teachers are more prone to making superficial comments when the corrections are done directly on the students' papers. For this reason, I always use a different sheet of paper.

I have found that word-processing has been a great help to me in giving what I think is appropriate feedback. First of all, I am human like the rest of you and feel the same electrical jolts you do when I encounter a subject-verb disagreement or a

bizarre verb tense that has never before been seen by native speakers of English. I would be lying if I said this does not cause a great deal of teeth gnashing. Just as I know intellectually it is not going to do a great deal of good to nag about these things, emotionally I cannot let them pass. Therefore, while I am reading the paper for the first time, I note discrete point entries under a small section labeled "SOME OTHER ITEMS TO CONSIDER."

Once this has taken place, I can direct my attention to the more important problems of organizational design, weakness in argumentation, appropriateness of evidence, and so forth. The word processor allows me to rearrange these thoughts so that those issues which I deem most important appear first in the evaluation and those of lesser importance come last--even though this may not be the order in which my thinking took place. "SOME OTHER ITEMS TO CONSIDER" always comes last.

From my experience, organizational observations reap more immediate results in terms of student performance than discrete point corrections. This observation is confirmed by Burt (1975):

> "...the correction of one global error in a sentence does more to make clear the speaker's intended message than the correction of several local errors in the same sentence (p. 62)."

By global error Burt means word order, sentence connectors, and other areas of syntax crucial to the organization of ideas in an utterance.

Corder (1974) suggests a further reason for teachers to devote their attention to global errors.

> "The errors of performance will characteristically be unsystematic and the errors of competence, systematic (p.25)."

Corder goes on to say that you might designate the former as "mistakes" and the latter as "errors." Mistakes are of no significance in the process of language learning; however, the problem of determining what is a learner's mistake and what is a learner's error is one of some difficulty. Corder also rightly mentions that just because a learner repeats a correct form does not mean that it has been learned.

Later in the week I give a verbal critique on issues which have general relevance to the group and then pass back the essays with my more individual critique attached. Revision is not a part of the training at this stage; however, corrections and improvements are expected in essays which follow. Furthermore, a final paper of about five pages which is required at the end of the term is expected to be an expansion of and an improvement upon one of the two-page assignments. This represents a major revision undertaking.

A two-part grading system is used for these compositions. The highest score would be 5 over 5; the top score represents "content" and the bottom score represents "form." The scale is absolute rather than relative so that some students go for weeks without significant movement in their scores even though there is

marked improvement in their writing. This is one reason the weekly evaluation form I prepare must be thorough in citing areas of strength as well as weakness. When persistent effort results in a breakthrough to a higher level, the achievement has great meaning because this marks a significant step forward in ability.

Writing is an exhausting activity for both students and teachers, but from this experience can emerge some of the richest evidence that language growth has occurred. That evidence is as apparent to the students as it is to the instructor. Perhaps this is the reason my greatest triumphs and failures as an English teacher have happened in the writing classroom--but it is my opinion that triumphs far outweigh the failures.

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